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The L2 acquisition of children from migrant backgrounds: How age, L1, input and cognitive factors shape this process

Commonly-held popular beliefs hold that migrant children in a host society learn a second language (L2) quickly, effortlessly and with uniform outcomes, in contrast to migrant adults. This keynote draws on 10 years of research with over 300 early English L2 learners of various ages and L1 backgrounds to show that these popular beliefs are myths. First, the developmental trajectories of English L2 children demonstrate that it takes years in elementary school for their English abilities to approach that of their monolingual peers, and that some linguistic domains are acquired faster than others, e.g., narrative skills in the L2 reach monolingual levels well in advance of accuracy with verb morphology. Throughout the elementary school years, children show huge individual variation in their rates of English L2 acquisition for vocabulary, morphology, syntax and narrative skills. Sources of these individual differences include both child-internal and child-external factors, indicating that multiple mechanisms underlie child L2 acquisition. Child-internal factors that influence the rate of L2 acquisition include age of acquisition, L1 typology and cognitive factors like verbal memory and analytical reasoning. Proximal external factors include both quantity and quality of L2 input. Longer exposure to L2 input, un-controversially, predicts better L2 abilities; however, quality factors like the source and richness of this L2 input also play a role in shaping L2 acquisition. Distal external factors, like maternal education levels, are related to quantity and quality of input and, in turn, also predict children's L2 acquisition. Finally, not all early English L2 learners converge with their monolingual peers even by young adulthood for morphosyntax, and some individual difference factors continue to influence L2 abilities at this age. Overall, this research suggests we need to re-consider assumptions about early L2 learners, like quick and effortless acquisition leading to uniform outcomes. The protracted rate of acquisition and the sensitivity of L2 children's developmental trajectories to individual difference factors argue for better and more targeted L2 support in elementary schools.